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Helen Brandt '14

Illinois Wesleyan University, hbrandt@iwu.edu

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American by Citizenship or American at Heart?

An analysis of becoming an “American” as seen through the eyes of an Indian-American immigrant.

By Helen Brandt

Illinois Wesleyan University

Introduction:

Learning and experiencing the culture of a country for an immigrant is quite different than for someone who has grown up in that country and culture. Most native citizens take the differences for granted, but for immigrants, these variations can cause feelings of alienation in a new culture. Beginning my research, I wanted to learn what becoming an American was like. The end result of my research showed that being an American does not simply mean being born here or acquiring citizenship. It also entails adapting to certain recognizable aspects of the U.S. culture, and one does not need to be born here to learn that.

Some American citizens have lived in the U.S. their whole lives without truly becoming invested in American values. My consultant, Dr. Jaggi, felt that he had become an American, in some substantive sense of the word, before arriving to the U.S. Dr. Jaggi, who originally came from India, is a professor of Physics here at Illinois Wesleyan University. Much of my initial research pointed to a divide felt by Indian immigrants in being an Indian in an American culture. However, Dr. Jaggi appeared to assimilate right away when he came over, and he did not want to return to India soon after he arrived in the U.S.

This ability to easily assimilate had a lot to do with Dr. Jaggi's personality in India, and how his values fit in with many of the American values. He does not feel that he is an "outsider" in the U.S., as he is actively involved in his University's community and holds positions of trust and leadership in many community organizations, such as the Bloomington Public Library, as well as the Bloomington-Normal Indian community. I learned that while many immigrants from India have similar stories, Dr. Jaggi's

story differs from the immigrant stories highlighted in the secondary literature I consulted, suggesting that each immigration story is unique.

Assumptions and Early Hypotheses:

Going into research, I assumed that the American immigration process was generally difficult. I recall seeing posters around campus that juxtapose late 18th-early 19th century immigrants at Ellis Island with contemporary immigrants, highlighting the lengthy waiting period inherent in the citizenship process today. While those stories are true, not every immigration story is identical. My interest in Indian culture has mostly come from the stories of friends who traveled to parts of India, or from seeing movies or documentaries about various aspects of Indian culture. While my view of India and the culture was considerably limited, I amount I did know fascinated me.

This intrigue sparked my interest, and I considered asking Dr. Jaggi to participate in my research. When I heard he might be interested, I started to study immigration from India. Through conducting research, a couple of points stood out to me, which I realized I would want to listen closely for incase Dr. Jaggi mentioned them. The first was the idea of remittance. Remittance is the money sent from an immigrant to their family in their home country. I had read and heard about how important remittance is for many immigrant families around the world. In 2004, India received \$21.7 billion in remittance, and was the largest recipient of remittance in the world (Singh, 2006).

Another aspect of Indian immigration, I learned, was that many

individuals from India intended to return there one day. They came to America for jobs, many being highly skilled and having been requested to come work here, but they someday planned to return to India. This goal could also be seen in the distinction made between life at home and life at work or in public, "South Asian American immigrants will often use 'American-ness' and whiteness interchangeably, and say that it is only their public lives that are structured by whiteness" (Rudrappa, 2004). This divide shows how some Indian-Americans feel out of place in American society, and the difficulty in mixing their cultures.

It is understandable to feel this way, as there are many aspects of Indian culture that are dissimilar to American culture. As Mira Kamdar writes, "India is severely hierarchical in which a caste system orders human beings from inferior to superior rank and allots them specific social roles" (2007). While America has numerous classes, caste systems are exceedingly different. This system also dictates how individuals should address each other, depending on inferiority or superiority. Another common assumption sometimes made by Americans is that all Indians are Hindus, and while "many people on the Hindu right wish Americans who don't know Indians well would make [this assumption]," the author also acknowledges that, "Indian-Americans are as diverse as Indians themselves" (Kamdar, 2007).

As insightful as all of these assumptions were for starting my research, I found that little of it directly applied to my consultant, or he was the complete opposite of my assumptions. He made me realize that generalizations are not always useful, and are sometimes contradictory.

Ethnographic Methods:

When first presented with the research topic, I had a difficult time thinking of an individual who I thought would be willing or have the time to participate in this endeavor with me. A friend suggested to me that Dr. Jaggi might be interested in my project, because he had participated in similar interviews before. When I asked him if he would like to join me in this project, he said he was happy to, and gave me some ideas on resources to use, including an interview he had previously done about his immigration story. We conducted all of our interviews in Dr. Jaggi's office, and I took handwritten notes. There was one longer interview (Interview of 2.15.13) and two shorter interviews (Interview of 2.28.13 and 3.8.13), but I asked him additional questions many times while we took photos.

I employed multiple techniques of visual ethnography in the creation of this project. Rather than simply interviewing my consultant, I asked Dr. Jaggi to use visual representations to help illustrate his story. Visual ethnography utilizes photos or other visual media to emphasize the text or story, and enhances the meaning found in cultural anthropological research. It is also more collaborative than many other anthropological methods, because it involves the consultant through the identification of photos of their own culture, as well as giving them the opportunity to pick out the subjects that are most important to them (Figure 1). These methods not only made my project more interactive and interesting, but also allowed my participant to show me his story, rather than only telling me.



Figure 1. Dr. Jaggi and I in his office exemplifying visual ethnography methods, “Anthropology happens to be one of my favorite academic disciplines...it has been fun working with such a thoughtful student!” (Interview of 3.8.13)-Photograph by Ken Suevel

As Dr. Jaggi shared his experiences with me, he showed me pictures of his family and friends from the Indian-American community here in Bloomington. These images helped me gain a greater insight into the importance of friends and family in his life, which he also exemplified in the numerous photos he and I took involving him and his friends. Having Dr. Jaggi show me his photos helped both of us prepare for the next step after the interviews, which was taking the photographs for this paper.

We first collaborated on the themes that we thought were the most important from our first interview, and then came up with ways to show these themes through new photographs. We thought of some ideas and took one or two pictures every couple of days, and then I would edit them between meeting times. In some of the photos, I used Photoshop to convey a past event that we could not take a photo of today. Other photos had the brightness adjusted, or

were cropped, but otherwise were not altered. After the completion of these photos, I sent them all to Dr. Jaggi to make certain I had altered the images correctly for their purposes in the photo-essay. We retook a few and then collaborated on the captions.

Presentation of Data:

Before our interview, I had already learned some answers to basic questions about Dr. Jaggi through reading an interview in which he had participated in (during 2009) for an oral history project conducted by the McLean County History Museum (MCHM). He is originally from the Indian city of Ranchi in the northeast, and he worked in Bombay (Tian, Transcript of the MCHM Interview of 9.12.2009). He immigrated to the U.S. alone in 1982, and brought his family over a few months later. He joked in his interview, “When I came to this country, I had one PhD, one wife, and one daughter. Now, I have the same one PhD, one wife, and one daughter. I came as a package” (Interview of 2.15.13).

The first important event I noted in Dr. Jaggi’s immigration story was his original reason for coming to America. A professor from Northwestern University and the Director of the Materials Research Center, Dr. Schwartz, gave a colloquium at the Atomic Energy Commission in India, where Dr. Jaggi worked as a scientist in the Nuclear Physics Division (Interview of 9.12.2009). During the colloquium, Dr. Jaggi asked Dr. Schwartz a couple of questions, and he asked to see Dr. Jaggi after the presentation. During the post-colloquium visit, Dr. Schwartz offered him a job at Northwestern University to conduct research (Figure 2). He accepted the position, and worked at the Technological Institute in Evanston for three years. As

the initial reason for Dr. Jaggi's immigration to the United States, we felt this was a key element in telling his story.

I tried to steer away from questions I knew Dr. Jaggi had already answered numerous times, and I went straight to the point of my project by asking him how he became an American. He first stated that the answer to the question is twofold, and if I wanted to know how he went through the technical process of becoming an American, as in an American citizen, that was easy to answer. But there was another way to understand this question, which was less straightforward.

The second important event was Dr. Jaggi's reason for deciding to become an American citizen. He made the decision in 2008, which was 26 years after first moving here, and 18 years after he could have first applied for citizenship. While he planned on staying in the U.S., he did not have a reason to renounce his Indian citizenship and become an American citizen (Interview of 2.15.12). What changed his mind was the Obama campaign (Figure 3). Dr. Jaggi wanted to be a part of it, to work for his campaign, and to vote for him in the 2008 election, which could not happen without becoming a citizen. This campaign was especially important because he wanted to be a part of this historical event, being the first African American president in American history. Before this campaign, he felt that politics were essentially the privileged people fighting with other privileged people for more power (Interview of 2.15.12). In September of that year, he took the steps to become a citizen, just in time for the election in November (Figure 4). Dr. Jaggi and I



Figure 2. A recreation of Dr. Jaggi walking by the building from Northwestern University, where he used to work, while thinking about Dr. Schwartz, “Ah! Northwestern University, my alma mater of sorts! I have wonderful memories, including those of my mentor Lyle Schwartz” (Interview of 3.8.13)-Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Raven Stubbs, '13, a Theatre Major, and Dr. Jaggi standing in front of an Obama Campaign office in this recreation photo, “Both of us are die-hard Obama supporters!” (Interview of 3.8.13)-Photograph by author.

believed that this was also integral to his story. However, if I wanted to know how he culturally became an American that was a different matter, because my



Figure 4. Dr. Jaggi shows me his naturalization certificate he received when becoming a citizen, “I became a citizen in 2008, specifically to be able to vote for Obama for President.” (Interview of 3.8.13)- Photograph by author.

original question implied that Dr. Jaggi was not an American before coming to the U.S. He thinks that, in some sense of the word, he has always been an American, even when he lived in India. Our third theme was the most striking aspect of his story to me. Unlike many immigrants who come to America and expect to return to India one day, Dr. Jaggi felt right at home when he came to the U.S., because many aspects of his personality

story of becoming an American. fit in perfectly with American cultural norms. For instance, he was uncomfortable with the strict hierarchies in India, and how they influenced how he addressed those in superior or inferior positions to him at his job. In addition, he liked how we seem to treat individuals in serving roles, such as waiters/waitresses, because we view them as equal citizens. How Americans communicate also portrays a sense of openness and acceptance, especially in our pragmatic tolerance of religions (Figure 5). For these reasons, Dr. Jaggi felt he was already an American upon arrival, and that the U.S. was where he belonged.



Figure 5. Dr. Jaggi with the IWU Chaplain, Elyse Nelson-Winger, in the IWU Chapel, “Growing up with Hindu parents, Jesuit teachers, Muslim best-friends, I developed a warmth toward a certain style of religiosity, even though I, myself, am a devout agnostic. My friend Elyse, perfectly captures that spirit!” (Interview of 3.8.12)-Photograph by author.



Figure 6 (On left). Divya Mani, '13, who has been studying Indian classical dance for over a decade, practices her dancing while Dr. Jaggi watches in this recreation photograph, "Watching her performances always reminds me of my own daughter, who is an accomplished dancer herself" (Interview of 3.8.13)-Photograph by author. **Figure 7 (On Right).** Elizabeth Maldonado, an employee at Sodexo, and Dr. Jaggi, "My friend/teacher with whom I practice my Spanish. Que bonita mi amiga!" (Interview of 3.8.13)-Photograph by author.

This feeling of always being an American does not imply that he does not participate in Indian culture as well. The fourth important theme was Dr. Jaggi's love of art and language in his culture, as well as in other cultures. His daughter is a renowned dancer of Indian Classical dance, and he and his family love to watch her and others perform, as well as other Indian art forms, such as Indian theatre (Figure 6). They also participate in numerous Indian and other groups' local cultural events. Dr. Jaggi said that he and his family, "eat at

home maybe 5 days a week ... Of the 5 meals that we have, maybe three of those are Indian" (Interview of 9.12.2009). They also enjoy cooking and dining out at many other cultures' restaurants. Dr.



Figure 8. Dr. Jaggi and Mike Theune, "a faculty colleague in the English department, with whom I share a love for language and poetry, including some kinds of rap, I think!" (Interview of 3.8.13)-Photograph by author.

Jaggi also knows a few languages. He knows Hindi, Bengali, and English, as well as having learned Spanish here at Wesleyan (Figure 7). This reflects his interest in speaking to many people from diverse backgrounds (Figure 8).

Data Analysis:

The themes from Dr. Jaggi's story are important aspects that show his personal values. They also show that he is not, according to my research, a typical example of an Indian immigrant.

Many key points I read about the average Indian immigrant were almost opposite for him. He told me that he and his family did not participate in the practice of remittance. In fact, it would be insulting if he did, because his family in India has a higher income than he does. He also mentioned that families who do send back remittance tend to be lower income families in general, since that money is really needed back at home.

Dr. Jaggi was also uncommon, in that after his second day here, he knew he wanted to live in this country. He felt that he belonged in the U.S., based on American cultural norms he already practiced. He never felt an uncomfortable divide between being Indian and American, because he felt he was already an American. This feeling showed in his distaste for the caste system in India, and in numerous other aspects, like his religious tolerance. He felt that people in many places around the world were less tolerant of religions in general, and Dr. Jaggi himself was born a Hindu, but he is now agnostic.

Even within the Indian-American community in Bloomington-Normal, Dr. Jaggi feels that his story is an atypical one, but he acknowledges that everyone's story is different. In general, though, he feels that many Indians came here to work, but "their hearts are in India" (Interview of 2.28.13). That is, they come here for work, but hope to go back home to India one day. Dr. Jaggi has his heart in America. Illinois Wesleyan University is

not just where he is employed; it is his community.

Conclusions:

I learned a lot about Indian immigration through my research and listening to Dr. Jaggi's stories and opinions, but I realized through my work that there is not one typical immigration story. People emigrate for various reasons, and even people from the same country have different reasons. Dr. Jaggi's story was happier than most, but neither his story nor any other's could be considered the norm. I learned from Dr. Jaggi that being an American is not only about attaining citizenship, but is also about integrating one's self into the culture, which may have been easy for Dr. Jaggi, but is not so for others, because, as he said, some people have their hearts in their home country.

I think it would have been intriguing to have gotten to know others in the Bloomington-Normal Indian community, and to have interviewed them to see how their stories were different from Dr. Jaggi's. Also, I would have liked to see how other individuals balanced their Indian origins with the American culture, and how they disliked or enjoyed that balance. But with the time I was allotted, I found out some valuable information without the help of the larger community- that while Dr. Jaggi's story is atypical, there really is not an average immigration story out there.

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